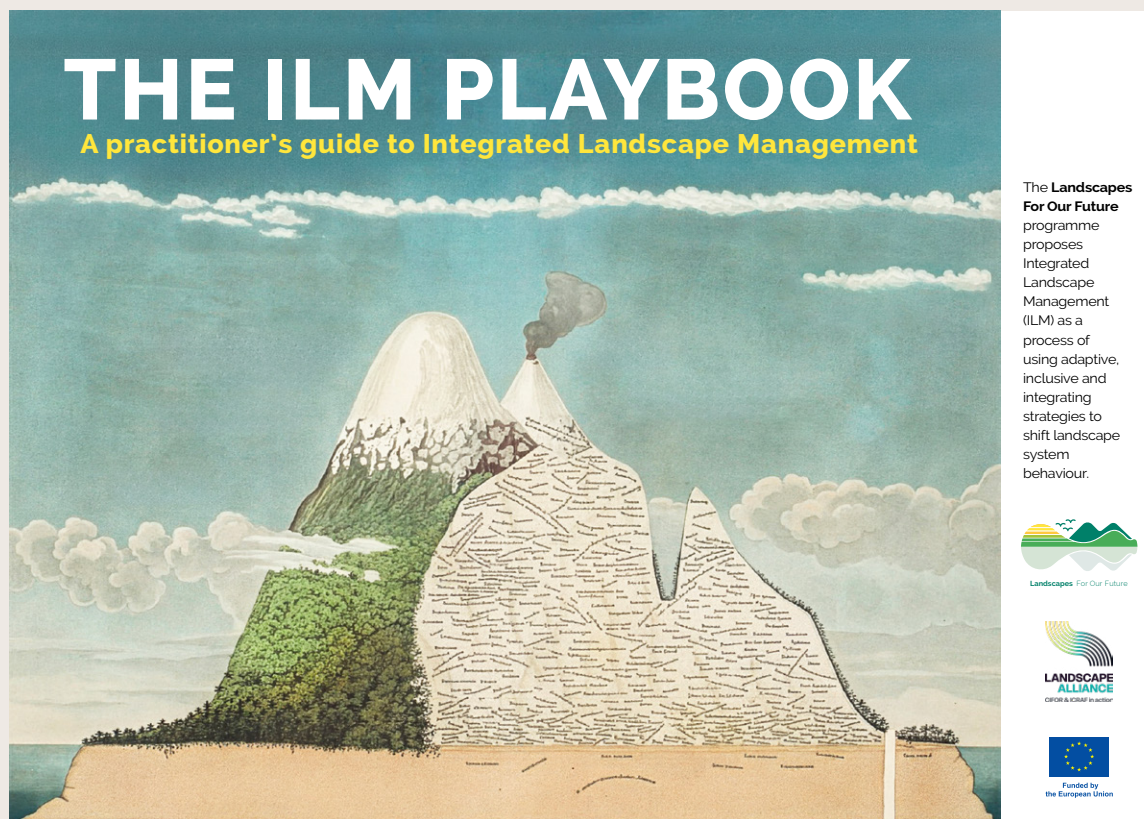


Extract from The ILM Playbook

The ILM Playbook is a practitioner curriculum developed through the EU-funded Landscapes For Our Future programme. Its **interactive web edition** provides a quick, non-linear route through the concepts and tools, while the **full-length PDF** provides the conceptual foundations, evidence and methodological depth behind them.

The concepts, methods and practical guidance were developed through the Central Component's work with project teams, partners and practitioners across the programme, and through the experience and learning generated in participating landscapes.



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Explore the full interactive ILM Playbook or access the complete reading edition at:
landscapesfuture.org/ilm-playbook

Positionality

Key take-aways

- Positionality is the difference between you and the people you are trying to support – and reflexivity, the self-critical scrutiny of that difference, is the precondition for honest analysis and effective intervention.
- Positionality has three layers – *embodied* (race, gender, nationality, comportment), *enacted* (clothing, methods, transport, the choices you make about who to meet) and *existential* (your presence itself perturbs the system) – and only the enacted layer is wholly under your control.
- Your presence is already an intervention before you have done anything: pretending you can observe a landscape from outside is delusional, so design for your effects rather than wishing them away.
- Beware development tourism – the brief, dry-season, project-itinerary visit that bakes spatial, seasonal, person, professional and diplomatic biases into your read of the landscape.
- Positionality is also a resource: you have networks, credentials and convening capacity that your target groups do not, and deploying them strategically towards the alt-heading is itself a leadership move – provided you know you are doing it.

For us, positionality is the difference between us and the people we are trying to support. To address it, reflexivity is required, the “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self”. We draw attention to three types of positionality.

Types of positionality

Embodied positionality

These are things we cannot do anything about, but which nevertheless send out powerful signals. They include your race, gender, nationality, and comportment – the way you carry yourself, your gestures, your walking and talking style, the language you speak and the accent you speak it in. Whether you like it or not, these things say something about you before you have said anything at all. If you are a woman walking into a highly patriarchal society, your gender will matter.

If your race or nationality differs from that of your target group, it will feed their stereotypes. If your target group is rural, your deportment may signal 'urban', 'connected', 'educated', or 'socially mobile'. Speaking through an interpreter, or in a language considered elite, powerfully signals difference.

Enacted positionality

These are things we often do not think about, but which can be addressed. At the personal level, they include our clothing, our accessories (phones, tablets, drones, other tech), our transport (showing up in a brand-new four-wheel drive sends very strong signals), and even our smell (soap, deodorant, perfume). If we arrive as a team and stand self-consciously in a group, we are almost willing our differences to be advertised.

Beyond personal presentation, enacted positionality includes our methods: the formality of our meetings, the questions we ask (and do not ask), who we choose to meet, how long we stay, whether we accept hospitality, and how we record what we learn. All of these are choices – often made unreflectively, but choices nonetheless.

One particularly important body of enacted positionality is how we approach rural communities. Here we refer to what Robert Chambers called '*development tourism*'—the brief, filtered visits that introduce systematic bias into what we see and hear (see Box 2).

Development tourism

Robert Chambers¹ coined the term 'rural development tourism' to describe the brief, biased visits through which outsiders typically encounter rural realities. The development tourist flies in, visits a project site, meets with local leaders, and flies out – having seen a carefully filtered version of the landscape that systematically excludes the poorest, the most marginalized, and the most inconvenient truths. From our perspective, development tourism can be a powerful way of ensuring that we deliberately invite a void to our observations, and bask in failure to development initiatives.

Chambers identified several interlocking biases that shape what the tourist sees:

Spatial biases: we visit places that are accessible – near roads, near towns, near project offices. Remote areas, where poverty is often deepest, remain invisible.

Seasonal biases: we visit during dry seasons when travel is easy and conditions appear manageable. The hunger season, when food stores are depleted, disease is prevalent, and coping strategies are strained, is rarely witnessed.

1 Chambers (1983)

Project biases: we visit successful sites, showcase villages, communities where things are working. Failures and struggles are not on the itinerary.

Person biases: we meet those who are presented to us, typically men, elites, the articulate, or those with time to attend meetings. Women, the very poor, the socially marginalized, and those whose daily survival leaves no time for visitors remain unseen and unheard.

Professional biases: we see what our training has prepared us to see. The agronomist sees soils and crops; the economist sees markets and prices; the ecologist sees species and habitats. Each disciplinary lens illuminates some things while casting others into shadow.

Diplomatic biases: we do not wish to offend our hosts, so we do not pose uncomfortable questions. Communities, in turn, perform for visitors, presenting what they think we want to see.

These biases do not reflect bad intentions; they are structural features of how outsiders encounter unfamiliar places. But their cumulative effect is profound: development tourists return home with confident assessments based on highly partial evidence. Interventions are then designed on the basis of what was seen, not what was missed.

A final subset of enacted positionality relates to the things that you intend to do with your target groups. From the outset, seeking to change peoples' practices is already provocative. Obviously, in designing your intervention you feel that it is 'right' and 'good' – these are powerful biases that will be resisted by your target groups to lesser or greater degrees. Introducing funding, creating new institutions, legitimizing certain voices over others, shifting who has authority: these are not subtle perturbations.

Existential positionality

Imagine a community deep inside the Congo Forest who have never encountered an outsider. An anthropologist arrives to study them. The difficulty is that, by virtue of showing up, the anthropologist has already changed the society. They are not studying a 'pristine' system; they are studying a system that now includes themselves.

The same is true for any intervention. Simply by being present – without having done anything at all – you have changed the system. Your mass, however small, exerts force. The effects may be tiny but, accumulated over time, may shift the system's heading in ways you do not notice and may not intend.

This is not to say that you should stay away. It is to recognize that your presence is already an intervention. You are not observing from outside; you are part of the configuration. This is a form of power – subtle but real. Be aware of it.

Addressing positionality

You cannot eliminate your effects; you can only account for them. You should not, under any circumstances, ignore them. The trick is to recognize that you are different from your target groups- imagining that you are 'the same' is delusional. How, then, can you manage these differences and capitalize upon them?

Navigating embodied positionality

You cannot change your race, gender, nationality, or the way your body has learned to move through the world. But you can be aware of what these signal, and you can compensate. If you are entering a patriarchal society, recognize that gender will shape how you are heard. If your race or nationality triggers stereotypes, be conscious of what assumptions may precede you. Greet people warmly, even if not in their language – warmth translates. The goal is not to pretend these differences do not exist, but to acknowledge them and work with awareness.

Navigating enacted positionality

Here you have genuine choices. Dress modestly. Limit the technology you visibly carry. Think about the vehicle you arrive in. Be conscious of standing in a huddle with your team. Stay longer than the development tourist. Meet people who are not on the official itinerary. Show up in the hunger season. Ask questions you do not already know the answer to. Accept hospitality. These are small adjustments, but they shift how you are perceived and what you are able to learn.

Navigating existential positionality

Your presence changes things whether you intend it to or not. Accept this. You have known unknowns (you know you do not fully understand how your presence changes dynamics) and unknown unknowns (effects you are not even aware of). Awareness and humility here are not paralysis – they are adaptive competence. You cannot observe from outside the system; you can only observe from within it, as a participant who alters what you observe.

Capitalizing on positionality

Compared to a rural community, you are elite. You have credentials, connections, networks. You move in circles of influence that your target groups do not. This is not something to be embarrassed about – it is a resource. The question is whether you deploy it strategically towards the alt-heading you seek. Can you open doors? Confer legitimacy? Connect people who would not otherwise meet? Positionality is not only a bias to be managed; it is a capacity that can be used – and using this capability is a key tenet of leadership.

Designing for reflexivity

Positionality cannot rest on individual self-awareness alone; it requires intervention architecture. Build in mechanisms for communities to give feedback on how they experience your presence. Document how your framing evolves. Conduct power mapping that includes your own role. Create regular moments for examining whose voice is being heard – and whose is not.

Positionality does not counsel inaction. Reflexive positioning means intervening with awareness: recognizing your presence as part of the system, tracking the effects you create, and adapting based on what you observe. Interventions fail when they misread contexts, miss key dynamics, or inadvertently reinforce the problems they aim to solve. Reflexivity is not just ethical – it is effectiveness.

References and further reading

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